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The Developing Daniloff Affair

THE SOVIETS who took the American journalist Nicholas Daniloff hostage last week have now compounded the original outrage by charging Mr. Daniloff with espionage and announcing that he will be tried as a spy. Mr. Daniloff, the Moscow correspondent of U.S. News & World Report, was kidnapped by the Soviet government, the one that spends so much of its time complaining that its benign and peaceful purposes in this world go woefully unacknowledged by the United States.

The talk coming out of Moscow has been uncommonly cynical, even by Kremlin standards. Its spokesmen have taken to parody in describing the various legal "protections" Mr. Daniloff will get and in putting forward the preposterous view that this trial, if it occurs, will have the purpose of discovering the truth. This imitation due process is a farce. So are the Kremlin's unconvincing lamentations that the United States has let a little matter get in the way of resolving the great life-and-death issues that confront and divide the superpowers. If Mr. Gorbachev & Co. wanted to get on with the business currently being negotiated between this country and the U.S.S.R. they would not be holding Nick Daniloff hostage.

Mr. Daniloff has been imprisoned for 10 days now. In that time the U.S. government, which began by speaking in a number of voices and not very coherently, has finally managed to get more coherence—and indignation—into its message. The president publicly warned the Soviets yesterday about the consequences of their hostage-

taking. But even as the government toughens up, one can expect considerable numbers of people to go the other way. It is already being hinted at that Mr. Daniloff may have violated some Soviet laws unconnected to the seizure of the package the authorities planted on him. As the Soviet system—its rules, habits and statutes—is fundamentally inimical to the practice of journalism as we understand that term in the West, it would be surprising if the Soviet authorities could not find some law to incriminate any journalist in Moscow who has been doing a good job.

What is important is that we in this country—for once—not sink into the sea of doubt that often marks these hostage episodes. We do not need to go around looking for clues as to how some misguided action on the part of the United States impelled the Russians to do this. We don't need to buy the line that Nick Daniloff must have been doing something shady. We don't need to accept the idea that there is some rough equivalence between Mr. Daniloff and the apprehended Genadi Zakharov.

Above all, we do not need to settle into that bemused state of mind whereby we subtly transform an outrage into a way of life, a kind of business-as-usual condition, letting the unjust imprisonment of this man become a kind of intermittent but semipermanent "issue," one that loses all its urgency and its impact. The Soviets must be made to understand a) that there is a real price for this and b) that it will get higher, not lower, with the passage of each day.